

Hockey Towns: The Making of Special Places in America and Canada

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Introduction

We approach our subject with trepidation: *we know what you must be thinking*. Hockey towns? In a *scholarly* conference? What's next, a paper on the top-ten, all-time backhand goals by left-wingers in WHA playoffs? Even when academics read hockey seriously, we skate close to that line between the scholarly and the popular, the significant and the trivial. "Hockey towns" is on that line. We all know at least some of the glossy local histories that declare their towns as the quintessential hockey town, distinctive for its embrace of the sport, or its ability to produce National Hockey League-caliber talent. And we all know and love the Kraft Hockeyville© enterprise, the annual contest run since 2006 by Kraft Foods and the CBC in which hundreds of towns across Canada submit bids to be recognized as hockeytown. During the CBC's Hockey Day in Canada, NHL Commissioner Gary Bettman awards the lucky burgh with cash for arena renovations and the chance to host a NHL pre-season game. This affection for hockey towns is heartwarming; but it is contrived. It implies that for Canadians, *any* town can be hockeytown. The modern hockeytown phenomenon is largely hype fuelled by advertising, local pride and the myth that hockey is an organic, "natural" folk game; that its development is the inevitable unfolding of Canada writ small.¹

There is only one scholarly analysis of the hockeytown fad: Jonathan Cha's 2011 study of Montreal's post-lockout PR campaign <<*La ville est hockey*>>. ² Cha argues that hockey is, above all, an urban phenomenon, and in places such as Calgary, Ottawa, Edmonton and Detroit, NHL playoff success brought about a "hockeyization" of the downtown core, where team colors and logos festoon buildings and street signs, "claiming" the city for hockey. He asks: "*Qu'est-ce qu'une ville de hockey?*" A place where residents have a perennial infatuation with the game; there are lots of local rinks; widespread diffusion of information about the game exists; home teams have long stretches of success, and where a space in the city has been "hockeyized."³ For Cha, only one city fits them all: Montreal, "*la Mecque du hockey*." Cha's study works, but his insistence that a hockeytown be metropolitan and based on big-league success limits his scope.

Our paper argues that real "hockeytowns" do exist—that place matters in the history of hockey—but for reasons other than those that motivate the writers of hockeytown tomes or Hockeyville© petitioners. Sport geographers have argued that "places" are ensembles of landscapes, artifacts, memories, ideologies, rituals, and other elements. As Blake Gumbrecht has shown in his work on football towns, an ensemble has historical roots.⁴ In the same way, real hockey towns have deep roots; they become hockey towns when their *structures* permit that peculiar cultural conjuncture to take place. Hockey towns happen when their economies, demographics and institutions conspire to create an environment where hockey has a central place in a town's sporting infrastructure, where characters cement it into civic culture, and where there develops a shared meaning of the game. Hockeytowns are not things, but historical processes.⁵ And we demonstrate that this process happened in Sherbrooke, Quebec and in Eveleth, Minnesota in the half century between the end of World War I and 1972.

Sherbrooke

Hockey had an early start in Sherbrooke. The first club was on ice in 1888, and from that time on the game mushroomed.⁶ By 1908, there were 22 hockey clubs in town and the competition fostered talent.⁷ In 1910, a Sherbrooke team contested the Allan Cup, Canada's senior amateur championship, the first of three times that a local team made it to that lofty height. But as Serge Gingras notes, only in the 1920s did hockey really "take off" in town.⁸ Between 1920 and the 70s, intra-city hockey thrived in leagues organized for schoolboys, juniors, juveniles, bankers and local industries. Regionally, Sherbrooke minor hockey teams at all levels dominated Eastern Townships leagues and advanced to provincial playdowns 16 times, 1924-49. Sherbrooke teams made their greatest mark at the senior and intermediate ranks. Twice, intermediate teams succeeded well enough to advance into the senior ranks. Founded in 1934, the Sherbrooke Maple Leafs won the provincial title in 1935 and became the Sherbrooke Red Raiders in 1936, playing in the Quebec Provincial Senior League. In 1947, they became the Sherbrooke St-François (Saints) who toiled for eight seasons in the Quebec Senior League against NHL farm teams such as the Montreal Royals and the New York Rovers. They were hugely popular and celebrated for both their on-ice success and for their unusual "*trio de couleur*": Herbie and Ossie Carnegie, and Manny McIntrye, the only all-African-Canadian line in the sport.⁹ A second team, the Castors, started in 1949, rose to the senior ranks in 1961, enjoying almost a decade of success. They won the Quebec title in 1964 and, in 1965, the Allan Cup and the right to travel to Europe at Christmas 1965, playing in Sweden, Czechoslovakia and Russia. The Castors folded in 1969, one of the many senior hockey victims of NHL expansion. Their collapse brought to an end an important era in local history.¹⁰ Between 1920 and 1970, King Hockey ruled in the town of Sherbrooke; the game was in its bones. But how?

First, economy. Like other Canadian milltowns, economy shaped hockey here in three ways: as rivalry among the town's manufacturers, as working-class culture, and as enterprise itself. Businessmen iced company teams as emblems of their enterprises: the Jenckes Manufacturing; Paton Woolen Mills; the Rand Company. Workers in these companies rallied around the game as players and spectators, much as did miners in Kirkland Lake or longshoremen in Port Arthur. And in Sherbrooke, the sport spawned industry itself, the celebrated Sher-Wood stick factory, founded by Léopold Drolet in 1949, responding to "*une certain penurie de batons de hockey.*" In the 1940s, even though the CCM sporting goods company in nearby St-Jean d'Iberville, QC made hockey sticks, local players in Sherbrooke used Hespelers, as Drolet recalled, made by a "*compagnie ontarienne.*" In the province of Quebec, "*les Canadiens n'ont jamais fait confiance aux produits chez nous... Ils ... preferaient acheter ça en Ontario ou n'importe ou; en autant que ce n'était pas local!*" As such, establishing a hockey stick factory in Sherbrooke was more than a business; it was a cultural statement.¹¹ It thrived until the 1980s, when composite sticks began to wedge into the market.¹²

By the time hockey took off in Sherbrooke a remarkable demographic transition was afoot: a Loyalist, anglophone society had become almost wholly francophone. That process, "*refrancisation*"¹³ was almost complete by 1930 and local hockey derived energy from it. If anglo-Sherbrookers gave birth to local hockey, by the 1920s francophones took charge as coaches, organizers and players. The transition was, in renowned historian J.I. Little's words, a "*peaceable conquest*"¹⁴; as Michel Vigneault's observed of Irish and French hockey clubs in 1900s Montreal, they "*helped one another.*"¹⁵ Still, language was embedded in local rivalries: between Lennoxville clubs and the Sherbrooke-Est *Canadiens*; between teams from St. Patrick's School and *École sacré-coeur*. It was expressed in playful ways, too, such as the 1925 Christmas

Day exhibition game announced between the “French-Canadians” and the “Maroons,” a local echo, perhaps, of Montreal’s cross-town NHL ethnic rivalry.¹⁶ Still, the predominance of French-speakers locally made the game, by the 1940s anyway, a local symbol of French-Canadian identity.

Sherbrooke was hockeytown because its most important institutions – parochial schools and local government - embraced the game. Unlike some other places in Quebec, Sherbrooke’s Catholic clergy, especially *les Frères de Sacré-Coeur* and the Irish Presentation Brothers, “*les grands pionniers*,” who at their schools and rinks built the base of Sherbrooke’s hockey pyramid. No less important was the town’s government, which twice in the years between World War I and 1970, ponied up funds to provide state-of-the-art arenas for its local players. In 1929, the City granted \$25,000 to help build the *Arena de l’Exposition* on Rue Parc.¹⁷ The “Old Arena” had artificial ice and seated 2,850—a proper barn for the staging of hockey spectacles. It was eclipsed in 1966, when the city built its modern, multi-function *Palais des Sports*, where 5,818 fans could squeeze in to see senior hockey. By then, prices had gone up: \$1,150,000 was the bill. Meantime, the city boasted several other, smaller indoor rinks, like the one in East Sherbrooke and one on the campus of St. Pat’s. And outdoor rinks, it seems, were everywhere.

For all of this “structure,” we remember that hockey *people* make hockey towns, and Sherbrooke had them in numbers. Several of them rose as players from town hockey to professional ranks, including George Povey, Gilles Dubé, Gerry Plamondon, Albert Langlois and many others. Among Sherbrooke coaches, no one overshadowed the Saints’ Ivan Dugré and the Castors’ Georges Roy, each with national championship credentials. But Sherbrooke had an especial knack for producing hockey builders and organizers: two local men – the fiery Art

Lapierre¹⁸ and placid Henry Crochetière – became President of the Quebec Amateur Hockey Association; and the latter, VP of the CAHA.

Finally, hockey in Sherbrooke created a durable collective memory among both the townspeople and the players who passed through in these years. Even today, Sherbrookers take pride in their “dynastie de gagnants,” dulled not one bit by the revolving door of junior and minor pro teams in town since the 1970s. Sherbrooke was a special place for players, too, and they kept coming back for alumni games, such as that between the Red Raiders and Saints vets in 1957, and the charity spectacles between Montreal and Sherbrooke oldtimers in 1968, and among Saints oldtimers themselves in 1971; all of them to packed houses in the Expo Arena. For a time, in the 1970s, Sherbrooke Oldtimers established formal association of alumni from the Red Raiders and Castors, and a local hall of fame that was publicized widely, even by established francophone Montreal sportswriters, such as *La Patrie*’s Charles Mayer.¹⁹ In a province where memory is so central to national identity, Sherbrooke’s hockey past resonates. Here then, was the anatomy of a hockey town.

Eveleth

The Montreal Game swept south from Manitoba into Minnesota in the 1890s, through border towns like Roseau and Warroad and into the new Iron Range mining towns of Eveleth, Virginia, and Hibbing. Eveleth’s first town hockey teams in 1903 had access to several ponds and an “enclosed” small natural ice rink. When the locals played Two Harbors in January 1903, the *Mining News* concluded that “Hockey is practically a new game on the Range. With proper support, Eveleth can put up a good team, as there is plenty of first class material here.” This was

an understatement, especially from 1920 to 1960, when Eveleth was by any analysis the most productive hockeytown in America.²⁰

Lying on the east edge of the Mesabi Iron Range, Eveleth's crude ore began feeding America's industrial growth in the late 1890s. Demand rose to a peak during World War Two and then slowly declined -- a curve that roughly parallels Eveleth's hockey dominance. While raw material flowed out on the Duluth, Missabe and Northern Railroad, laborers flowed in, mostly from Croatia, Slovenia, Serbia, Italy, and the Nordic Countries. Population from 1910 to 1940 stayed around 7000 and slowly dropped to around 5000 by 1970. The names of a few Eveleth star players reflect the demography. Three of the NHL's top goaltenders of the period were Eveleth products -- Frank Brimsek, Mike Karakas, and Sam LoPresti. John Mariucci skated for the Blackhawks before coaching the Minnesota Gophers to their position as the perennial NCAA power. His top player in the mid-1950s was John Mayasich who many considered the top American player of his era. The list of other influential Eveleth players and coaches is extensive and of diverse ethnicity: Ikola, Gambucci, Almquist, Palazarri, Yurkovich, Matchefts, and Pavelich.

They thrived in a booster environment. In 1919, hockey patrons built the Eveleth Recreation Building, which boasted indoor, natural ice sheets for both hockey and curling. In January 1922 Mayor Victor Esseling, business leaders, and their Eveleth Hockey Association opened a new \$50,000, 3000-seat indoor, artificial ice arena called the Hippodrome, which allowed Eveleth to enter the new USAHA, the first true national circuit in American hockey. To win a crown, little Eveleth would first have to win a regional group then defeat in playoffs competitors from the likes of Boston, New York, Cleveland, and Minneapolis. For a few years

the boosters attracted future NHL stars like Ching Johnson, Percy Galbraith and Vic Dejardins to play Senior Amateur hockey in little Eveleth. How did they do it?

The Reds treasurer's reports somehow survived to tell a story that doubtless reflected the practices of most if not all senior "amateur" teams. They paid their talent. For instance, the overall 1924-25 budget of almost \$42,000 included \$17,511.23 for "salaries and labor." The 1925-26 budget of \$42,302.98 included \$11,963.65 for "salaries – players." The 1923-24 report was even more specific, listing player disbursements over two seasons, including \$200 to Ching Johnson in 1923, \$1846.50 to Vic DesJardins and \$2146.55 to Percy Galbraith over two seasons. To put these salaries in perspective, one may compare Galbraith's 1923-24 Eveleth "salary" of \$1511 to the \$2500 the NHL's Boston Bruins offered him to play in their inaugural year that began in November 1924. Galbraith's \$1500 as an "amateur" in 1924 was also more than the \$1350 that Norbert Steele was offered by the minor league Kansas City Americans for the 1941-42 season. It is not so much that the Eveleth Reds were the rare senior amateur franchise secretly paying its players. The rarity is that the treasurer's financial statements have survived.²¹

The Reds and the USAHA folded just about when Cliff Thompson arrived from the Twin Cities in 1926 to teach and coach at Eveleth HS until his retirement in 1958. A flamboyant figure, Thompson typically sported a long overcoat and a fancy fedora as he drove around Eveleth and the Iron Range in a shiny roadster, often filled with players. Recognizing that he needed to cultivate talent at a young age, Thompson quickly put his thumb on the local youth teams. As US Hockey Hall of Famer Connie Pleban explained to hockey historian Jim Coughlin, "He would pick his team by watching us play. When you were ready for high school hockey, you were already on the team."²² Thompson was an exceptional motivator. He had three other elements to program success – a system he explained to *Colliers* magazine in a 1941 feature

story. The first was to train goaltenders in courage, glove control, and angles. The second was for all five skaters to move as a unit. In his words, “No jumble hockey...If my boys don’t play teamwork, they don’t play at all.” The third was a manual “doped out and designed to cover almost every situation that arises in a game.”²³

The statistical record speaks for itself. By one account, the record of Eveleth High School from 1926-1952 was 335-26. This included winning the first Minnesota state tournament championship in 1945 as well as four straight, 1948-51. Eveleth Junior College, also coached by Thompson, rolled to a 171-28 record over the same period. More impressive was the distribution of Eveleth talent. During the mid-1930s some 147 Eveleth boys were “playing hockey on professional, semi-professional, college, and amateur teams from coast to coast...” When eight teams competed for the 1935 AAU championship in Chicago, one quarter of the players were from the small town of Eveleth. Hockey was a ticket to college and beyond, especially during the Depression. And as one booster explained, Eveleth players “told the newspaper men” that their success stemmed from the immigrant mix. In their minds, they were “a real AMERICAN team.” In 1973 local boosters opened the U.S. Hockey Hall of Fame. Among the inaugural inductees were Cliff Thompson, Frank Brimsek, Mike Karakas, Sam LoPresti, and John Mariucci. One might question the marketing wisdom of placing a Hall of Fame in a remote mining town, over three hours north of the Twin Cities. But it would be difficult to challenge Eveleth’s right to be considered America’s top hockeytown of the last century.²⁴

A “hockeytown” cannot be easily built from the top down, as Jonathan Cha insisted. The process must develop from the bottom up, as in Eveleth and Sherbrooke. Like some other towns and cities across the continent, they enjoyed a convergence of topography, economy, climate, demography, institutions, and specific personalities to create a sustained hockey culture at both

the levels of grassroots player development and high spectacle. Detroit, a self-styled hockeytown, pales in comparison, no matter how many octopi its fans throw on the ice.

ENDNOTES

¹Some of the hockeytown authors are well aware of (and refreshingly unapologetic for) the scope of their enterprise. “I’m not interested in hockey as a metaphor for Canadian life or whether it’s our wintry religion or a frozen chunk of our soul,” Bill Boyd writes in the introduction to his popular 1998 paperback *Hockey Towns*. “I’ll leave that to the poets and sociologists. I just wanted to... talk with some players and ex-players and coaches and scouts and owners and fans.” *Hockey Towns: Stories of Small Town Hockey in Canada* (Toronto: Seal Books) 3. The hockey town phenomenon has become widely celebrated in recent years, but it is hardly new and Canadian places have crowned themselves with that honour for quite some time. “Quebec has the reputation of being ‘THE hockey city,’” one local Quebec City newspaper advertisement read in 1955. See “Hockey Season Opens Tonight; Special Pre-Game Ceremonies” *Quebec Chronicle-Telegraph*, 13 October 1955, p. 11, cols 7, 8.

² Jonathan Cha, “<<La Ville est Hockey>>: au-delà du slogan, une quête d’identité urbaine” in Audrey Laurin-Lamothe et Nicolas Moreau, <<Le Canadien de Montréal: Une légende repensée>> (Montreal: Les Presses de l’Université de Montreal, 2011) 107-32.

³ “Le hockey doit être au coeur des préoccupations de la ville” [Hockey has to be at the heart of the city’s preoccupations]. See also Terry Frei, “<<Qu’est-ce qu’une ville de hockey?>>” RDS.ca/hockey, 1 September 2006. Quoted in Cha, “<<La ville>>,” 117. RDS is TSN’s French-language cable television all-sports station.

⁴ The notion of ensemble is developed in John Bale, *Sport, space and the city* (London: Routledge, 1993); J. Bale, *Landscapes of modern sport* (Leicester: University of Leicester, 1994); J. Raitz, ed., *The theater of sport* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995); Bruce Kuklick, *To Everything A Season: Shibe Park and Urban Philadelphia, 1909-1976* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991). On football towns, see, Blake Gumprecht, “Stadium Culture: College Athletics and The Making Of Place In The American College Town,” *Southeastern Geographer*, Vol. 33, No. 1 (May 2003), 28-53.

⁵ Here we acknowledge our intellectual debt to Fernand Braudel and the French *Annales* school of history, whose model of *structure* and *conjoncture* inform our thinking. See H.R. Trevor-Roper, “Fernand Braudel, the Annales, and the Mediterranean” *Journal of Modern History* 44, 4 (December 1972) 468-79. We acknowledge, too, Edward Thompson’s definition of class as a parallel for our discussion of hockeytowns as “process.” See E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London: Victor Gollancz Ltd, 1963) 9-10.

⁶ Donald Guay, *L’histoire du hockey au Québec: Origine et développement d’un phénomène culturel* (Chicoutimi: JCL Editions 1990) 190.

⁷ Richard Choquette, “Les associations volontaires et le changement social: Sherbrooke, 1855-1909.” M.A. Thesis, Université de Sherbrooke (November 1987) 169.

⁸ Serge Gingras, *Une Dynastie de Gagnants: Historique du hockey a Sherbrooke* (GGC Editions 1997) 66.

⁹ See William Humber, *A Sporting Chance: Achievements of African-Canadian Athletes* (Toronto: Natural Heritage Books, 2004) 105-8.

¹⁰ Gingras, *Dynastie*, chs 3, 4.

¹¹ Gilles Pelchat, *Sher-Wood et son batisseur Léopold Drolet* (Sherbrooke: GGC Editions, 2000) 37, 75 [French Canadians never had confidence in their own products... They... preferred to buy them in Ontario, or anywhere, as long as it wasn't local!].

¹² See “No More Wooden Hockey Sticks; Sher-Wood Layoffs,” *Sherbrooke Record*, 12 October 2007, 3.

¹³ See Albert Gravel, “Refrancisation,” *Vade-Mecum du Sherbrooke* (Sherbrooke: La Tribune, 1962) 96-97.

¹⁴ See J.I. Little, “The peaceable conquest: French Canadian colonization in the eastern townships during the nineteenth century” (PhD Dissertation, University of Ottawa, 1977).

¹⁵ Michel Vigneault, “The Catholic Connection: French Canadians and Irishmen In Montreal Hockey, 1895-1917,” Unpublished Paper presented at NASSH (1993).

¹⁶ See “Exhibition Game Christmas Afternoon,” *Sherbrooke Record*, 22 December 1925, 12, col. 1.

¹⁷ Jean-Pierre Kesteman, *Histoire de Sherbrooke* (GGC Editions) 150.

¹⁸ Lapierre was coach of the Red Raiders when he sought and was elected to the QAHA presidency. He served in that role for three terms (1937-40). When the CAHA declared two players who had transferred illegally to QAHA teams from Ontario in 1937, Lapierre denounced the ruling and allowed them to play. The showdown led to the suspension of the QAHA from the CAHA, until cooler heads prevailed. See “Quebec Decides to Ignore C.A.H.A. and Their Rulings,” *Toronto Star*, 9 December 1937; “Duncan Suspends Q.A.H.A. Plans Commission,” *Toronto Star*, 9 December 1937; “Allow Quebec Teams in C.A.H.A. Playdowns,” *Globe & Mail* [Toronto] 24 January 1938, 17, cols 6-7; “Quebec Teams Again Eligible for Playdowns,” *Globe & Mail* [Toronto] 3 February 1938, 15, col. 1.

¹⁹ See “L’association des vétérans du hockey de Sherbrooke et du district – Le table de la Renomé,” Fonds Charles Mayer, Library and Archives of Canada, Ottawa.

²⁰ Donald Clark, “Eveleth Hockey, First Fifty Years, 1903-1952, unpublished manuscript, 1-2; n.a. “Eveleth: The Hockey Capital of the USA,” and G.P Finnegan, “The Eveleth Hockey Story,” in *Missabe Iron Ranger*, December 1952, 5, 7, 11, 15, 16-17, 31, 49. All materials found in “Eveleth” folder, U. S. Hockey Hall of Fame Archives, Eveleth, Minnesota. Our thanks to USHHF Curator Tom Sersha for providing these materials. Linda Tyssen, “Range legend feted in new display at Eveleth Hippodrome,” *Misabi Daily News*, October 12th, 2005, http://www.virginiamn.com/mdn/index.php?sect_rank=1&story_id=204894 (accessed 9-6-06).

²¹ Eveleth Hockey Association, Financial Report, 1923-24 Season, March 31, 1924; Eveleth Hockey Association, Operating Statement, 1924-25 Season; Arrowhead Hockey Association, Statement of Receipts and Disbursements, March 29, 1926; idem, March 29, 1926; Walter Percy Galbraith, NHL Players Contract, 1924-25 Season; Norbert Steele 1941-42 Contract -- all in "Eveleth File," US Hockey Hall of Fame, Eveleth MN.

²² "Records of School Teams," in *Official Ice Hockey Rules of the NCAA, 1928-29*, ed. Rufus James Trimble (New York: American Sports Publishing Co., 1928), 70.
Jim Coughlin writing as Seamus O'Coughlin, *Squaw Valley Gold: American Hockey's Olympic Odyssey*. (San Jose: Writer's Showcase, 2001), 69-70; Robert Thomson, "Ice Man," *Colliers* 107 (15 March 1941) 31-32.

²³ Robert Thomson, "Ice Man," 31-32; O'Coughlin, *Squaw Valley Gold*, 70.

²⁴ Finnegan, "The Eveleth Hockey Story," 31, 49; Clark, "Eveleth Hockey: First Fifty Years, 1903-1952," 1, 8-9.

But at 150, Canada remains a hockey country and looks like it always will be. There are plenty of reasons to believe that hockey ought to have loosened its grip as Canada's game of myth and legend by now. As we celebrate the country's 150th birthday, so many changes have taken place in sport and the manner in which we consume it that have worked to undermine hockey's central role in the national culture, especially in the 50 years since the great Centennial bash of 1967. Major League Baseball and the National Basketball Association set up shop here, challenging the National Hockey League's Niche, a company that researches and compiles information on cities, recently named the best college towns in America, focusing on the overall livability of places where undergraduates from a top-250 college make up at least 10% of the town's overall population. To determine "livability," Niche narrowed in on each city's cost of living, public-school quality, the percentage of residents who hold at least a bachelor's degree, and the overall strength of the area's real-estate market. "The general atmosphere is a very family friendly place, from clean parks and trails to regulating smoking in public places," one resident shared. "I would choose Fort Collins as one of the top places to live in Colorado due to its exposed nature and friendly community. Now, hockey towns in the U.S. can enter for a chance to win a \$150,000 arena makeover courtesy of Kraft, have an NHL preseason game played in its local arena showcased on TV and earn the title "Kraft Hockeyville 2015." The local rink is a special place that brings any adult who's played the game back to their childhood." Marketing On Ice. This unique, fully integrated scale-marketing program will include TV, digital and in-store media support. In addition to Kraft Hockeyville, the newly expanded agreement makes Kraft an Official Sponsor of the NHL and the NHLPA in North America and an Official Partner of the NHL Winter Classic, NHL Stadium Series, NHL All-Star Game, NHL Heritage Classic, NHL Face-Off and the Stanley Cup Playoffs.